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Boston
1893

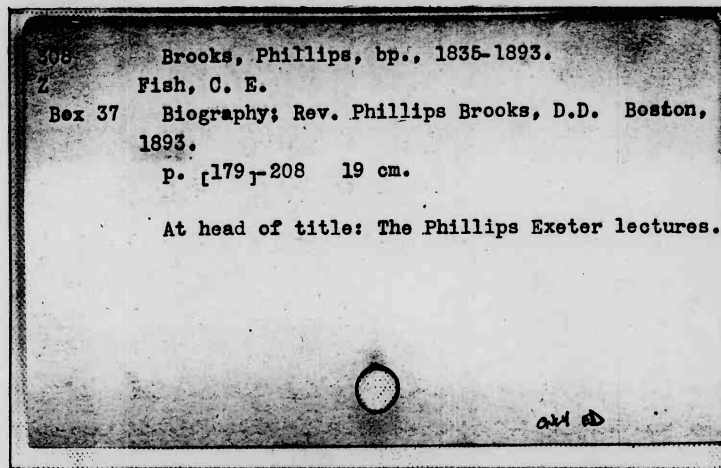
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BIOGRAPHY

REV. PHILLIPS BROOKS, D.D.

BOSTON, U.S.A.
GINN & COMPANY, PUBLISHERS
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PREFATORY NOTE.

THIS lecture is one of a series delivered by invitation of the Board of Trustees before the students of Phillips Exeter Academy.

The lecture is published in pamphlet form at the request of many teachers for use in the class-room.

CHARLES E. FISH,
Principal Phillips Exeter Academy.

EXETER, N. H., July 13, 1883.

BIOGRAPHY.

I HAVE been anxious to choose a subject for my lecture which should have to do both with literature and with life. I have pictured to myself what now I see before me, an assemblage of young men to whom the two worlds — the world of books and the world of men — were freshly and delightfully opening. Let me take some subject for my evening's talk, I said to myself, which shall bring those two great worlds together; and so I have come to speak to you about Biography.

Biography is, in its very name, the literature of life. It is especially the literature of the individual human life. All true literature is the expression of life of some sort. Books are the pictures into which life passes as the landscape passes through the artist's brain into the glowing canvas, gaining thereby that which it had not in itself, but also turning forth to sight its own more subtle and spiritual meanings. And since the noblest life on earth is always human life, the literature which deals with human life must always be the noblest literature. And since the individual human life must always have a distinctness and interest which cannot belong to any of the groups of human lives, biography must always have a charm which no other kind of history can rival.

I think that I would rather have written a great biography than a great book of any other sort, as I would rather have painted a great portrait than any other kind of picture. At any rate, the writing of a biography, or, indeed, the proper reading of it, requires one faculty which is not very common, and which does not come into action without some experience. It requires the power of large vital imagination, the power of conceiving of a life as a whole. Do you remember, when you were a child, how vague the city which you lived in was to you? Certain houses in the city, certain streets, you knew; but the city as a whole, — Boston, or Springfield, or New York, — one total thing, — you had to grow older and make more associations, and get more ideality, before you could lay hold of that. You had to comprehend it, to grasp around it, as it were. So it is with a life. To know the list of Napoleon's achievements, to be able to quote a page of Carlyle's writings, — that is one thing; but to have Napoleon Bonaparte or Thomas Carlyle stand out distinct, a complete being by himself, a unit among unities, like a mountain rising out of the plain, like a star shining in the sky, — that is another thing and very different. That needs a special power. He who has not that power is not fit to read, much less fit to write, a biography.

It must always be a noteworthy fact that the great book of the world is the story of a life. The New Testament is a biography. Make it a mere book of dogmas, and its vitality is gone. Make it a book of laws, and it grows hard and untimely. Make it a biography, and it is a true book of life. Make it the history of Jesus of Nazareth, and the world holds it in its heart forever. Not simply his coming or his

going, not simply his birth or his death, but the living, the total life, of Jesus is the world's salvation. And the Book in which his life shines orb'd and distinct is the world's treasure. There, as in all best biographies, two values of a marked and well-depicted life appear. It is of value, first, because it is exceptional, and also because it is representative. Every life is at once like and unlike every other. Every good story of a life, therefore, sets before those who read it something which is imitable and something which is incapable of imitation; and thereby come two different sorts of stimulus and inspiration. It gives us help like that of the stars which guide the ship from without, and also like that of the fire which burns beneath the engines of the ship itself.

But let me come to my Lecture. I want to divide what I have to say to you about biographies into three parts. I want to speak to you about the subjects of biographies, and the writers of biographies, and the readers of biographies. A life must first be lived, and then it must be written, and then it must be read, before the power of a biography is quite complete.

You sit some day in your study reading Boswell's Johnson. Are there not three people holding communion with one another in that silent room, — Johnson and Boswell and you? Johnson lived the life, Boswell wrote it, you are reading it. It is like the sun, the atmosphere, and the earth, making one system. The sun shines through the atmosphere to give the earth its warmth and richness. This is what makes every picture of a man reading and being influenced by a biography an interesting thing. It is the completeness of this group of three. John Stuart

Mill tells us about the inspiration which came to him, when he was a young man, from Plato's *Pictures of Socrates*. And, among modern biographies, he remembers the value which he found in Condorcet's *Life of Turgot*, "a book," he says, "well calculated to rouse the best sort of enthusiasm, since it contains one of the wisest and noblest of lives, delineated by one of the wisest and noblest of men." In that sentence you can see the three together, — Turgot, Condorcet, and Mill. In another part of his autobiography the same great Englishman records how he was rescued from extreme depression by the reading of something in the *Memoirs of Marmontel*, the most picturesque of literary histories. Or one likes to think of Dr. Franklin lying on what proved to be his death-bed and listening to the reading of Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*. There is something very impressive in letting our imagination picture the stately and sonorous Doctor bringing in and introducing the singers one by one before the calm eyes of the homely but sympathetic philosopher. You ought never to read a biography without letting such a group construct itself for your imagination. Johnson, and Boswell, and you, — all three are there: the subject, the author, and the reader. Your reading will be a live thing if you can feel the presence of your two companions, and make them, as it were, feel yours.

1. Let me speak, then, first, about the subjects of biographies. I believe fully that the intrinsic life of any human being is so interesting, that if it can be simply and sympathetically put in words it will be legitimately interesting to other men. Have you never noticed how anybody, boy or man, who talks to

you about himself compels your attention? I say "who talks about himself." I mean, of course, his true self. If he talks about an unreal, an affected, an imaginary self, a self which he would like to seem to be, instead of the self he really is, he tires and disgusts you; but be sure of this, that there is not one of us living to-day so simple and monotonous a life that, if he be true and natural, his life faithfully written would not be worthy of men's eyes and hold men's hearts. Not one of us, therefore, who, if he be true, and pure, and natural, may not, though his life never should be written, be interesting and stimulating to his fellow-men in some small circle as they touch his life.

It is this truth which accounts for the power of the simplest kind of biographies, — those which record the lives of obscure people who have done no noteworthy work in the world. I think of two such books. One of them is the "*Story of Ida*," the life of an Italian girl of exquisite character, and whose life was the very pattern of a humble tragedy. Mr. Ruskin, in his introduction to the book, says, with his usual exaggeration, that "the lives in which the public are interested are hardly ever worth writing." That, of course, is quite untrue. But he goes on to praise and introduce a sweet and simple story, which is a delightful illustration of the truth he overstates. It is like a flower plucked out of the thousands of the field which, besides the charm of its own fragrance, has the other value, that it reminds us how fragrant are all the flowers which still grow unplucked in the field from which this came. The other book is very different. It is Thomas Hughes's "*Memoir of a Brother*," the story of a brave, hopeful, consecrated life, which came

to no display, but did its duty out of sight and under endless disappointment, as the stream wrestles with the hindrances which stop its channel deep in the untrodden woods.

These are the lives which give us faith in human nature, the lives which now and then it is good for somebody to write, if only to remind us how possible it is for such lives to be lived.

But we must not let ourselves be misled by such a statement as that which I quoted from Mr. Ruskin, so far as to think that notable and exceptional lives are not peculiarly entitled to biography. Distinction is a legitimate object of our interest, if we do not over-estimate its value. Distinction is the emphasis put upon qualities by circumstances. He who listens to the long music of human history hears the special stress with which some great human note was uttered long ago, ringing down the ages and mingling with and enriching the later music of modern days. It is a perfectly legitimate curiosity with which men ask about that resonant, far-reaching life. They are probably asking with a deeper impulse than they know. They are dimly aware that in that famous, interesting man their own humanity — which it is endlessly pathetic to see how men are always trying and always failing to understand — is felt pulsating at one of its most sensitive and vital points. Let us think, then, of some of the kinds of famous men whom our biographies embalm.

The first class of men whose lives ought specially to be written and read are those rare men who present broad pictures of the healthiest and simplest qualities of human nature most largely and attractively displayed. Not men of eccentricities, not men

of specialties, but men of universal inspiration and appeal, — men, shall we not say, like Shakespeare's Horatio, to whom poor distracted Hamlet cries: —

"Thou art e'en as *just* a man
As e'er my conversation coped with all."

How heavily and confidently always the disturbed soul rests on simple justice.

I shall quote as illustrations in all my Lecture only the biographies of English-speaking men by English-speaking men. And in this first category of biographies, preëminent for their broad humanness, their general healthiness of thought and being, I do not hesitate a moment which to name. There are two lives which stand out clearly as the two best biographies ever written in the English language. Carlyle says, "In England we have simply one good biography, this Boswell's Johnson." Certainly there is one other worthy to be set beside it, which is Lockhart's Scott. Happy the boy who very early gets at those two books, and feels and feeds upon the broad and rich humanity of the two men whom they keep ever picturesque and living. Johnson and Scott, — so human in their strength and in their weakness, in their virtues and in their faults: one like a day of clouds and storms, the other like a day of sunshine and bright breezes, yet both like Nature, both real in times of unreality, both going bravely and christianly into that darkness and tragicallness which gathered at the last on both their lives, — two men worthy of having their lives written, fortunate both in the biographers who wrote their lives; worthy to be read and re-read, and read again by all men who want to keep their manhood healthy, broad, and brave, and true!

Set these two great books first, then, easily first, among English biographies. The streets of London and the streets of Edinburgh live to-day with the images of these two men more than any others of the millions who have walked in them. But in a broader way the streets of human nature still live with their presence. The unfading interest in Dr. Johnson is one of the good signs of English character. Men do not read his books, but they never cease to care about him. It shows what hold the best and broadest human qualities always keep on the heart of man. This man, who had to be coaxed into favor before a request could be asked, and whose friends and equals were afraid to remonstrate with him except by a round-robin, was yet capable of the truest delicacy, the purest modesty, the most religious love for all that was greater and better than himself. But the great value of him was his reality. He was a perpetual protest against the artificialness and unreality of that strange eighteenth century in which he lived. And Walter Scott, who was thirteen years old when Dr. Johnson died, bore witness for true humanity in the next century, when men were beginning to delight in that Byronic scorn of life which has deepened into the pessimism of these later days, by the healthy and cheery faith with which he accepted the fact that, as he once wrote, "We have all our various combats to fight in the best of all possible worlds, and like brave fellow-soldiers ought to assist one another as much as possible."

Yes, it is good for each new generation of English-speaking boys as they come on to the stage of life to find two such brave figures there already. Generations come and go, but these two brave men still keep

possession of the stage, and do no man can say how much to make and keep life ever brave and true.

We come to a distinctly different type of biography when we pass on to speak of those men whose written lives have value not from their broad humanity, but from the way in which they gather up and throw out into clear light some certain period of the world's history, some special stage of human life. Wonderful is this power which an age has to select one of its men, and crowd itself into him and hold him up before the world and say, "Know me by him!" "The age of Pericles," we say, or, "The age of Lorenzo de Medici," and all our study of the history of the fifth century before Christ, or of the fifteenth century after Christ, could not put us into such clear possession of those remarkable times as we should have if we really could know Pericles or the great Lorenzo. Of all such books for us Americans the greatest must be Irving's "Life of Washington." "Washington," says Irving, "had very little private life." All the more for that reason it is true that if you master the public life of Washington you have learned how this nation came to be. His early share in the French and Indian wars, which was like a trial-trip of the ship which was afterwards to fight with broader seas, his sympathy with the first discontents, his slow approach to the idea of Independence, his steadfastness during the war, his passage out of military back to civil life, all of these make his career characteristic. It is the history of the time, all crowded by a sort of composite photograph into him. Washington was by no means the cold, unromantic, passionless monster that men have sometimes pictured him to be. It was not lack of qualities but poise of qual-

ities that made him calm. It was not absence of color but harmony of color that made his life white and transparent. And so it is with no disparagement of the personal nature of our great man that we may claim as the special value of his life the way in which it sums up in itself the picturesque beginnings of our history. Read it for that. Read also Wirt's "Life of Patrick Henry," which is the story of another nature like a lens, more brilliant but not less true than Washington's.

And thus of many ages you will find, if you look for it, the graphic man, who stands forever after his age has passed away as its picture and its commentary. Would you know what sort of a thing English life was in the fifteenth century, the age of the Inquisition, of the Spanish Armada, of the discovery of America, of the Field of the Cloth of Gold? Read the direct and simple English of the "Life of Cardinal Wolsey," by his gentleman usher, George Cavendish. Would you catch the spirit of adventure which filled the breezy days of Queen Elizabeth? Would you feel the throb of newly found rivers beating through a great new discovered continent? Would you see the flashes of color and hear the bursts of song which came back in those days from mysterious countries which scientific discovery had not yet disenchanted of their poetry and reduced to prose? Would you know what it was to live in one of the mornings of the world when all the birds were singing and all the eastern heavens were aglow? Read the "Life of Walter Raleigh," as it has come down to us without a writer's name from some enthusiastic biographer of his own time.

Demand everywhere that the inarticulate life of a

time shall utter itself in the life of its typical man, as a brooding, smouldering fire bursts forth at one point into flame. Do not feel that you know any age or country till you can clearly see its characteristic man.

The same is true about a critical event. You think about the great English Revolution, that convulsion of the seventeenth century which broke the power of privilege in state and church and made possible all that is happening in England and America to-day, all that is going to happen in the next hundred years, which a man would so like to live and see. How shall you get the spirit and soul and meaning of that great event, and seem to have actually seen it as it came? You must know its great man. You must study the life of Oliver Cromwell, upon whom the true historical instinct of Carlyle has fastened as the man who really did the thing, as much, that is, as any one man did it, as much as any one man ever does anything in history. You must get deep into him. You must see how he led and was led; how he made his times and was made by them; how impossible it is to take him in imagination out of those times and set him down in any other. It does not mean that you are to make him slavishly your hero and think everything he did was right, but get the man, his hates, his loves, his dreams, his blundering hopes, his noble, hot, half-forged purposes, his faith, his doubt, get all of these in one vehement person clear before your soul, and then you will know how privilege had to go and liberty had to come in England and America.

And as an age or an event, so an occupation or a profession reveals itself in a biography. Many of our great libraries now are divided and arranged both horizontally and perpendicularly. All the books on

one level belong to the same subject; all the books in one upright stack belong to the same nation. So it is with men in history. You may think of all the people in the reign of Queen Elizabeth, engaged in all their different works. That is the horizontal conception. Or you may think of all the poets, or all the carpenters, or all the sailors in the whole series of ages. That is the perpendicularity of history. If you take the latter view, then, you want some man in each profession who shall make that profession a reality to you. Do you not know what a soldier is, as no abstract book could teach you, when you have read the pages which our great American soldier wrote in the days which he so piteously begged of death a little time to tell the story of his life? He who would understand the true life of a pure scholar, let him read the delightful story of Isaac Casaubon, which was written a few years ago by Mark Pattison, or, shall we say, the life of the pugnacious Richard Bentley, which was written by Bishop Monk, the very model of a scholar's life of a scholar? If you want to see what it may be to be a minister, do not look at the parson of your parish, but read Brooke's "Life of Robertson." When you want to know how bravely and brightly the true lover and questioner of nature may pass his days, let the life of that healthiest of naturalists, Frank Buckland, be your teacher. Let adventure shine before you in the life of Livingstone. In every occupation you will find some representative, some man who did that thing most healthily and truly. It would be good, I think, if in those critical years, sometimes so anxiously, sometimes so very lightly passed, in which men are deciding what they are to do with this mysterious gift of God which we call life, some wise and sympa-

thetic teacher, in the college or elsewhere, should hold a class in professional biography, and make the most representative man of each profession tell not by his lips, but by his life, what sort of man, and what sort of career his occupation makes. It might save, here and there, a foolish choice and an unhappy life.

And yet, again, there is another class of biographies which gives us types, neither of times, nor of events, nor of professions, but of characters. Have you ever read Lord Herbert of Cherbury's *Memoirs*, the most open-hearted of autobiographers, and felt his cheery, self-conceited voice bragging in your ear?—the very perfection of that strange fantastic thing which his strange century took for a gentleman, the selfish bully still dazzling his own eyes and other men's with the glare of personal courage and an easy generosity. Put alongside of his the noble story which has lately been given to the world by Leslie Stephen, of his friend Henry Fawcett, the blind statesman who, with infinite patience and assiduity and resolution and intelligence, conquered the prizes of usefulness and honor in the darkness; or, turning to the higher power of religion, read the story of the manly piety of Havelock, the missionary faith of Patterson, or the calm progress out of unbelief into a trust in God as the one refuge of the soul of the fine intellect of Ellen Watson,—read these, which are the three best and most healthy religious biographies I know, and feel how character is not a thing of which you can tell the nature in a list of qualities. It is something human: you must see it in a man; you must watch it kindling in an eye; you must hear it ringing in a voice; and so biographies are the best sermons.

Our first feeling, I suppose, is that all great men

ought to have their biographies, that all fine lives are capable of being finely written. And yet we find out by and by that some great men, some very great men, are unsuited for biography. Shakespeare has no biography; and, much as we would like to know what happened to him in his life, I think we all feel doubtful whether we should get much of increased and deepened richness in our thought of him if what he did and said had been recorded. The poet's life is in his poems. The more profoundly and spiritually he is a poet, the more thoroughly this is true, the more impossible a biography of him becomes. Where is the life of Shelley that gives you any notion of the beauty of his soul? The Skylark and the Cenci and the Adonais are the real events in his history. You fill yourself with them and you know him. The same is true of Wordsworth. There is not, there cannot be, any very valuable biography of him. For this reason, I think that the young reader ought to become well accustomed to reading the whole works of an author whom he really wants to know. I believe in those long, comely series of books labelled *Complete Works*. If you read a poet's masterpieces, you know them. If you have read everything which he has written, you know him. When you have become convinced that some great author, particularly some great poet, is really worthy of your study, that you must have him not simply as a recreation of an idle hour but as the companion of your life, then go and get all his works; put them, as near as may be, in the order in which he wrote them, and read them once, at least, straight through from end to end. Let your library, as it slowly grows, abound in "*complete works*;" so you have men, entire men, upon your shelves, if you

are man enough to bid them live for you. This is, after all, the subtlest form in which the biography of writing men can take its shape, and for many writing men it is the only form of biography which is possible.

I must not say more about the subjects of biography. These kinds of men which I have hurriedly named are the kinds of men about whom other men will ask, and so about whom books will be written. These are the stars which, being in the heaven of human life, and having some special color or some special light, must shine. There are others no less true and worthy of men's sight than they, which no man sees.

I want to speak now of the men who write biographies, the authors. And, first of all, there are the men who are their own biographers, — the men who, as the end of life approaches, gather up their experiences and tell the world about themselves before they go. In the great Uffizi Gallery at Florence there is a large assemblage of the portraits of the great artists, painted by themselves. Nobody can enter that vast, splendid room, thronged with its silent company, and not be conscious of a special sacredness and awe. Here is the way in which the great artists looked to themselves. Thus it was that Raphael saw the painter of the Sistine Madonna, and thus Leonardo conceived the painter of the Last Supper. It is the man himself telling the story of himself to himself. No wonder that each stands out there with a peculiarly clear and personal distinctness.

What that room is in art, a library of autobiographies is in human life. People like to tell us that

we do not know ourselves so well as our neighbors know us. I rather think that few maxims are less true than that. Our neighbors know our little tricks, of which we are unconscious; but any one of us who is at all thoughtful knows his real heart and nature as no other man has begun to know them. Therefore, he who will really tell us about himself makes his life stand forth very distinctly in its unity, its separateness, its reality.

English literature is rich in autobiography. It has, indeed, no tale so deep and subtle as that which is told in the Confessions of St. Augustine. It has no such complete and unreserved unbosoming of a life as is given by the strange Italian, Benvenuto Cellini, who is the very prince of unconcealment. But there is hardly any self-told life in any language which is more attractive than the autobiography of Edward Gibbon, in which he recounts the story of his own career in the same stately, pure prose in which he narrates the Decline and Fall of Rome. It must have needed a great faith in a man's self to write those sonorous pages. Two passages in them have passed into the history of man. One is that in which he describes how, in Rome, on the 15th of October, 1764, as he sat musing amid the ruins of the Capitol, while the barefooted friars were singing vespers in the Temple of Jupiter, the idea of writing the decline and fall of the city first started in his mind. The other is the passage in which the great historian records how, on the night of the 27th of June, 1787, between the hours of eleven and twelve, he wrote the last lines of the last page in a summer-house at Lausanne, and how then, laying down his pen, he "took several turns in a *berceau*, or covered walk of acacias,

which commanded a prospect of the country, the lake, and the mountains." The story is all very solemn and exalted. It is full of the feeling that the beginning and ending of a great literary work is as great an achievement as the foundation and completion of an empire, — as worthy of record and of honor; and as we read we feel so too.

A greater autobiography than Edward Gibbon's is our own Benjamin Franklin's. Franklin had exactly the genius and temperament of an autobiographer. He loved and admired himself; but he was so bent upon analysis and measurement that he could not let even himself pass without discrimination. The style is like Defoe. Indeed, we are pleased to find that he placed great value both on Defoe and Bunyan, whose stories are told so like his own. He watches his own life as he watched one of his own philosophical experiments. He flies his existence as he flew his kite, and he tells the world about it all just as a thoughtful boy might tell his mother what he had been doing, — sure of her kindly interest in him. The world is like a mother to Ben Franklin always: so domestic and familiar is his thought of her. He who has read this book has always afterwards the boy-man who wrote it clear and distinct among the men he knows.

Of autobiographies of our own time there are three which are full of characteristic life. There is John Stuart Mill's life of himself, so wonderfully cold, and calm, and clear, yet with the warmth of subdued possibilities of passion always burning in it, — a very sea of glass, mingled with fire. There is the story of James Nasmyth, the Scotch engineer and astronomer, written by himself, — the happiest life, in the most nat-

ural and simple elements of happiness, I think, that one can find. And I must add, although we have only a fragment of it yet, the autobiography of General Grant, the soldier who hated war; the American who had the spirit of the institutions of his country filling him; the author who, without literary training or pretension, or almost, one may say, the literary sense at all, has written in a style which has this great quality, that it is like a simple, brave, true man's talk.

Let men like these talk to you and tell you of themselves. Being dead, they yet can speak. How good it is sometimes to leave the crowded world, which is so hot about its trifles, and go into the company of these great souls which are so calm about the most momentous things!

Next to the autobiography comes the life which is written by some one who is of near kindred or of close association with the man of whom he writes. In such lives the feeling of gratitude and personal friendship comes in and makes an atmosphere which takes in him who reads as well as the subject and the author of the book. Of such biographies there is no happier or more fascinating instance than the *Memoir of Professor Agassiz* which Mrs. Agassiz gave to the world a few months ago. It is the picture of a sweet, strong nature turning in its first young simplicity to noble things, and keeping its simplicity through a long life by its perpetual association with them. It is a human creature loving the earth almost as we can imagine that a beast loves it, and yet at the same time studying it like a wise man. The sea and the glacier tell him their secrets. In his very dreams the extinct fishes build again for him their lost construction. There is a cool, bright freshness in every page. The

boy of twenty-two rolls himself in the snow for joy. The man has himself let down a hundred and twenty-five feet into the cold, blue, wonderful crevasse to see how the ice is made. Finally, the New World tempts him, and he becomes the apostle of science to America. All this is told us out of the lips which have the best right to tell it.

Take another biography. I do not know whether you boys are inclined to think that if you were school-teachers you would want to have one of your scholars write your history. There is a common notion about school life, — one of the stupid traditions which have an ounce of truth to eleven ounces of falsehood in them, — that school-teachers and school-boys are natural foes and cannot understand each other. And yet Arthur Stanley wrote the life of Dr. Thomas Arnold, his teacher in the old school at Rugby, in such a way that the great master's fame has been set like a jewel firm and bright in the record of the nineteenth century; and school-teaching owes no little of its new dignity and attractiveness to that delightful book. It has added a name to history, and almost a new sister to the family of the high arts.

Suppose that you could have the privilege of sitting down with Mrs. Agassiz and hearing her tell of the great naturalist and the enthusiastic, child-hearted, lion-hearted man! Suppose that you could walk with Dean Stanley and hear him tell about his great master, to whom he owed so much of his learning and his character! You can do both these things if you will read these books. The nature of the men they write of will come through the kindred natures and the warm love of those who write about them. It is sunshine poured through sunlight. So the story of Wil-

liam Lloyd Garrison, told by his children, has a certain richness about it which comes from the sympathy with his work which was fed in the home and at the very table of the great emancipator when these biographers were boys. So the life of Nathaniel Hawthorne, by Julian Hawthorne, while it has the faults has also much of the charm which belongs to a son's life of a father, — the charm of ancestral genius reflected through an hereditary genius like itself.

Besides these two, the autobiography and the friend's biography, there remains the great mass of biographies which must of necessity be the work of authors far removed from the subjects about whom they write, perhaps of quite different habits and associations. The biographer of M. Pasteur calls the book which tells his story, "*La Vie d'un Savant par un ignorant*," and as we read we easily see that there is some advantage for us in the fact that the author who writes writes from the outside, and is not himself a proficient in the knowledge and the art in which the great French naturalist excels. There is a quiet school-master at Harrow who spends his placid life in hearing school-boy lessons all day long, who, nevertheless, has written a biography of a soldier, a statesman, a ruler of men, — the picturesque and heroic Lord Lawrence, ruler of the Punjaub and subduer of the Indian mutiny, — which makes that terrible time live again and all its awful lessons burn like fire. This noble and most interesting book of Bosworth Smith is a fine instance of the kind of biography whose writer is neither bound by kindred nor identified by similarity of occupation with his hero. This author had never even seen the far-off gorgeous India in which his drama was enacted, nor had he had anything to do with mili-

tary life. Such books as his mean something different from the personal interest in one's own life from which comes the autobiography, something different from the desire to raise a monument to a dear friend, or to perpetuate a special bit of history. They mean that large and healthy sense which feels that every strong human career must have in it, whatever its particular field of action may have been, something which belongs to all humanity, and which it will do all human creatures good to know. Such a book, therefore, is a token of the humanness both of him who writes it and of him about whom it is written. Take another. Take Professor Masson's *Life of John Milton*. He who wants to know what was done in England during the great years which filled the middle of the seventeenth century may read that book, and one might almost say that he need read no other, so vitally does the great Puritan poet stand in the centre of the great tumult of human life, and so vitally does the humanity of his biographer feel him standing there.

Great as is the charm which other writers have, this writer, who writes solely because the man of whom he writes seems to him to belong to all mankind and to have something to say to every age, must always have a charm deeper than any other. Great is he who in some special vocation, as a soldier, a governor, a scientist, does good and helpful work for fellow-man. Greater still is he who, doing good work in his special occupation, carries within his devotion to it a human nature so rich and true that it breaks through his profession and claims the love and honor of his fellow-men, simply and purely as a man. His is the life which some true human eye discerns, and some loving and grateful hand makes the subject of a picture to which all men enthusiastically turn.

I cannot help fearing that in my evening's talk thus far I have hastily named too many of the great works of biography with which our literature is filled, and so have not made so clear as I should wish the subject of biography in general. It is a bad fault always so to paint the picture that men cannot see the forest for the trees. If, however, I have tempted any of my young hearers to read any of the books which I have named, my fault has not been wholly faulty. But as I pass on to say a few words of my third topic, the Reader of Biography, let me speak more generally.

First of all, what must the reader bring in order to get the real life out of the biography he reads? I answer in one word, a true life of his own. Reading the story of a man whom you admire, whose character is bright and splendid before you, may be the worst thing you can do, unless you meet it with a character and manhood which turns what you read into your own shape and appropriates this other man's vitality into its own. The object of reading biography, it cannot be too earnestly or too often said, is not imitation, but inspiration. Imitation does not require life; inspiration does. For imitation you need nothing but a lump of clay or putty; for inspiration you must have a pair of lungs. When will all teachers and all scholars learn that behind all acquirements there must lie character and powers, behind all learning you must have life? Before you can get mental training you must get a mind; before you can learn to live well you must learn to live; before one can become something one must be something. "To him that hath," so Jesus tells us, "to him shall be given." Therefore, to the lives of other men you must carry a

true life of your own,—convictions, intentions, resolutions, a true character. Then your career will not be swamped by theirs, though theirs may give to yours color and direction; then they will make you wiser, stronger, braver, but they will leave you still yourself. Here is the only danger which I know in the reading of biographies, lest he who reads shall lose himself, shall come to be not himself, but the feeble repetition of some other man. It is the danger which attends all friendship, all personal intercourse of man with man. Your own responsibilities, your own chances, your own thoughts, your own hopes, your own religion, which are different from those of any other man who ever lived, those you must keep sacred, and then summon the inspiration of the greatest and most vital men whom you can find to touch your life with their fire, and make you not what they are, but more thoroughly and energetically yourself.

And, then, bringing and keeping this life of his own, what sort of biographies shall any special young man select to read? Two sorts, I answer. Those of men most like himself in character and vocation, and those of men who are most unlike. Let him read the first sort for light and intensity; let him read the second for sympathy and breadth. Here is a young naturalist. Let him read the life of Agassiz of which I spoke. What preparation can be better for the life that is to deal immediately with nature than to see how nature filled and satisfied a very large, rich human life; what a great, fresh, happy, and hopeful man it made; how sacred nature was to him? Such a life well read must rescue the pursuit of natural science from its abstractness, and clothe it with human interest. Before I undertake any work, I think that it

will do me good to meet, and walk through the pages of his biography with, the best and greatest man who ever did that thing before. My work, when I go forth to do it, will seem at once more real and more ideal, more familiar and more exalted, for such reading. But at the same time my young naturalist should also read such a book as Dr. Holmes's *Life of Emerson*. He should see how full of strength and goodness a man might be who knew nothing of scientific studies; he should learn the poetic and philosophic values of the stars, and the mountains, and the field; he should provide himself with humility by learning the dignity and worth of thought and knowledge, which it is beyond his power or outside of his range to attain. These two lives together, one showing him the greatness of what he can do, the other showing him the greatness of what he cannot do; one making his purpose more intense, the other making his sympathy more extensive; both of them he should read with reverence and love.

And how should a biography be read? I answer, with as little of the literary sense as possible. A biography is, indeed, a book; but far more than it is a book it is a man. Insist on seeing and knowing the man whom it enshrines. Never lay the biography down until the man is a living, breathing, acting person to you. Then you may close, and lose, and forget the book; the man is yours forever. It is a poor telescope that keeps you thinking of its lens and does not make you possess the star. I said about an hour ago that the great Christian book was a biography. The Gospels are the greatest biography that was ever written. And how little literary feeling there is about the Gospels. How we hardly think about them as

a book. How it is the blessed man whom we see through their colorless transparency that occupies our attention and our thoughts! To read a biography must be to see a man, — Johnson or Scott or Macaulay. Boswell or Lockhart or Trevelyan must only be the friend who brings the two, you and Johnson or Macaulay or Scott, together.

I think that the reading of many biographies ought to be begun in the middle. It seems a disorderly suggestion, but it has reason in it. It is the way in which you come to know a man. You touch his life at some point in its course; you find it full of attractive activity; you grow interested in what he is doing. So you grow interested in him, and then, not till then, you care to know how he came to be what you find him, — what his training was; what his youth was; who his parents were, perhaps who his ancestors were, and who was the first man of his name who came over to America, and where that progenitor's other descendants have settled. The same is true, I think, of a biography. Indeed, I have often wondered whether a biography might not be written in that way. Let the *Life of General Grant* begin with the story of Shiloh or of Vicksburg, and when that glowing narrative has thoroughly interested the reader in the great soldier, then let us hear about the childhood in Ohio, and the early life at West Point, and St. Louis, and Galena. Probably biographers will not write so for us; but we may sometimes read thus the biographies which they have written in the dull order of chronology, and find them full of livelier and deeper interest.

And now what is it all for? I must not talk so

long as I have talked to-night, about a certain kind of literature, and urge you to give it a high place in your reading without trying, before I close, to gather up in simple statement the good results which have come to many, and which will come to you from an intelligent reading of biography. I mention four particulars.

It gives reality to foreign lands and distant times. There is no land so foreign and no time so distant that a familiar personality, set by imagination in the midst of it, will not make it familiar. Some friend of yours goes to live in Venice or Bombay, and how immediately your vision of that remote scene brightens into vividness. The place belongs to you. The Grand Canal and the Caves of Elephanta are real things. You see your friend floating on the "tremulous street," or losing himself in the gloom of the solemn cavern. Or you are able to picture to yourself how this other friend would have behaved in the days of Luther. You can imagine him back into the tumult of the Reformation. And straightway the Reformation days are here. Luther is denouncing Tetzel in your study. Biography does the same thing for us, only better. It takes the man who really lived in Venice or Bombay or Wittenburg and makes him real. It makes him live, and straightway all his time and place lives with him, as all the heavens spring into glory when the sun clothes itself with light. With each man who becomes a living being to you, a whole new world comes into being. Each new man is a new sun. In all our minds there are regions of recognized but unrealized space and time, only waiting for us to set a real living human life into the midst of them to make them open into reality and glow with life.

Still more important and interesting are the regions of thought which are unreal to me until some man stands in the midst of them and lights them up. I read the history of metaphysics. I open and study the great heavy tomes. If my tastes are in quite other directions I say, "How dull this whole thing is! How vague and dreary these abstractions are!" And then I turn and read the life of some great metaphysician, and how everything is changed. I do not understand this great science any more than I did before, but I see him understand it. The enthusiasm trembles in his voice, the light kindles in his eye, as he talks and looks upon these abstract propositions which appeared to me so dreary. It cannot be but that they catch his light. The whole world which they make is real to me through his reality. My universe is larger by this great expanse. So one world after another kindles into vividness when I see its human inhabitant. The world of music, the world of mathematics, the world of politics, the world of charity, the world of religion, each is a real world to me when in the midst of it stands its real man.

Again, think what must be the effect upon personal character of the reading of a great biography. If it is really a great life greatly told, like Johnson's, or like Scott's, two convictions grow up in us as we read: first, this man was vastly greater than I can ever be; and, second, this man, great as he is, is of the same human sort that I am of, and so I may attain to the same kind of greatness which he reached. The first conviction brings humility, the second brings encouragement. And humility and encouragement together, each by its very presence saving the other from the vices to which it is most inclined, these are

the elements which make the noblest character and the happiest life. To be humble because we are ourselves; to be courageous because we are part of the great humanity, and because all that any man in any time has done in some true sense belongs to us, in some true sense we did it; to catch the two certainties, one of the identity of mankind and the other of the essential and eternal distinctness of every man, even the most cheap and insignificant; to hold these two convictions in their true poise and proportion; to let them make for us one unity of character, this is a large part of the secret of good living, and no kind of book helps us to this so much as a good biography.

But, finally, may we not say that the supreme blessing of biography is that it is always bathing the special in the universal, and so renewing its vitality and freshness? Our little habits grow so hard. We get so set in our small ways of doing things. We become creatures of this moment of time on which we happen to have fallen. The power of dull fashion and routine takes possession not merely of the way we dress and talk, but of the way we think. Our schools have their cheap little standards, and our colleges have theirs, and our professions theirs, and every duty makes more of the way in which it is done than of the divine meaning and motive of doing it at all; all gets to seem parched and hardened like a midsummer plain, and then you take up your great biography and as you read is it not as if the fountains were flung open and the great river came pouring down over the arid desert? The local standard, the mere arbitrary fashion of the moment, disappears in the great richness of human life; the part bathes itself in the

whole; the morbid becomes healthy; the peculiar is freed from any haunting affectation, and becomes simply that individual expression of the universal which every true man must be.

Do we say that all this may come through large association with our living fellow-men without reading about the dead? Much of it may, no doubt, come so. But in some respects the great dead, whose faces look out on us through their biographies, have always the advantage; they are the best of their kind, the most picturesque illustrations of the characters they bear; their lives upon the earth are finished and complete. They will not change some day and throw into confusion the lessons which we have learned from them; and since they belong to many lands and many times they bring us a sense of universal human life which cannot come to us from the most active contact with living men, who, after all, must represent very much the same conditions to which we ourselves belong.

Therefore, while it is good to walk among the living, it is good also to live with the wise, great, good dead. It keeps out of life the dreadful feeling of extemporaneousness with its conceit and its despair. It makes us always know that God made other men before He made us. It furnishes a constant background for our living. It provides us with perpetual humility and inspiration.

There are some of the great old paintings in which some common work of common men is going on, some serious but most familiar action,—the meeting of two friends, the fighting of a battle, a marriage or a funeral, and all the background of the picture is a mass of living faces, dim, misty, evidently with a veil

between them and the life we live, yet evidently there, evidently watching the sad or happy scene, and evidently creating an atmosphere within which the action of the picture goes its way. Like such a picture is the life of one who lives in a library of biographies, and feels the lives which have been, always pouring in their spirit and example on the lives which have succeeded them upon the earth.

I thank you for your kind and patient attention, and if anything which I have said has been of interest or value to you, I am very glad.



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